DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 235 382 CE 037 320

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TITLE Excellence in Vocational Education.
INSTITUTION National Association of State Directors of Vocational Education.
PUB DATE Sep 83
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Role; *Educational Quality; *Leadership; Postsecondary Education; *Relevance (Education); Secondary Education; *Vocational Directors; *Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS *Excellence (Quality)

ABSTRACT

The current period of change in America brings to bear on the quality of vocational education a complex array of interrelated conditions and factors. Some of the more important of these variables are demographic shifts; economic conditions; technological innovation and change; and conditions specific to the educational enterprise itself, including improvements in equity, access and retention, competency-based education, lack of discipline, lack of financial support, low standards, qualifications of administrative and instructional personnel, and lack of up-to-date equipment for vocational training programs. A renewed and serious commitment to excellence by leaders in vocational education has the potential of fostering sound improvements with far-reaching implications. This commitment can be extended through the effective use of networks of substantial influence that are available to vocational education leaders. Action related to a renewed commitment to excellence will require the pooling of human, material, and physical resources within the educational community and with the private sector. Furthermore, excellence in vocational education will require continued federal government leadership. (YLB)

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ED235382

EXCELLENCE IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

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of Vocational Education

September, 1983

CE 037320

84-002092

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This publication has been developed as a companion paper to the previously published Position Statements entitled:

- *Vocational Education: Purposes, Roles, Responsibilities. May, 1980*
- *Reauthorization: Vocational Education Act. April, 1981*
- *Reauthorization: Vocational Education Act Structure. September, 1981*
- *Legislative History of Vocational Education. December, 1981*
- *The Role and Responsibility of Vocational Education in Economic Development and Productivity. December, 1981*

These articles are available from:

National Association of State Directors of Vocational Education

2020 North 14th Street
Arlington, VA 22201

This publication was developed and printed by the National Vocational Education Professional Development Consortium for the National Association of State Directors of Vocational Education.

EXCELLENCE IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Introduction

During the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, "access" and "equity" were pervasive educational concerns. Those concerns, in large measure, shaped much of the federal legislation written on vocational education during that time.

The current decade is being marked by a profound concern for the quality of education and its relationship to the economic strength of the nation. "Excellence" has become a salient theme in conjunction with equity and access.

The theme of excellence in education received a substantial boost on August 26, 1981, when Education Secretary Terrell H. Bell announced the creation of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The Commission was charged with the responsibility of assessing the quality of education in the United States and offering recommendations for improvement. Hearings were held throughout the nation and focused on various aspects of education, with education and work being one.

The National Association of State Directors of Vocational Education has been historically attentive to improving the quality and relevance of vocational education in the United States. This paper represents a public statement of the Association's renewal of its commitment to excellence in vocational education.

Forces and Factors Affecting Excellence in Vocational Education

Perhaps no other time in the twentieth century will be more important than the present for a renewed commitment to excellence in vocational education. We live in a period characterized by rapid transition — a period wherein the very nature of and requirements for work are at the forefront of the nation's consciousness, a period characterized by "megatrends" that have and will continue to have profound implications for how and where Americans earn their livelihood.

This period of change brings to bear on education a complex array of interrelated conditions and factors that serve both to foster and to hinder its quality. Some of the more important of those factors are demographic shifts, economic conditions, technological innovation and change, federal and state legislation, and conditions specific to the educational community itself. Some of these factors are presented in schematic form in figure 1 and are further discussed in the narrative to follow.

Demographic Shifts

Significant decreases in enrollment will continue throughout the decade in public secondary schools, whereas post-secondary enrollments will increase. The overall minority school-age population is expected to increase by five percent during the 1980s, while the white population between the ages of five to seventeen will decrease by nine percent. We already see increased concentrations of minority students in urban public schools, and in some cities and states the minority population is expected to become the majority by the year 2000.

Harold Hodgkinson (ASTD National Report, 1983) indicates that the United States is currently integrating into its mainstream the second largest group of immigrants in its history — some 13 million. The students of the immediate future will be, in many respects, quite unlike those of the immediate past.

The age profile of the population at large is also changing. Persons 65 years old and older are projected to constitute the largest sector of population growth, 58.5 percent. Some demographers predict that this situation will engender public debate as to which group's concerns are of higher priority and are, therefore, entitled to more of the scarce resources: (1) education (younger Americans), or (2) social security and health services (older Americans).

Patterns of migration are also changing as we witness growth in population in the Southeast, Far West, Southwest, and the Rocky Mountain regions and a concomitant decline in growth patterns of the Mideast, New England, and Great Lakes regions.

These illustrations describe but a few demographic shifts in the changing population profile of the nation. The quality of vocational education as well as the quality of its graduates is being and will continue to be influenced by these changes.

Our response to these and other demographic conditions must include continuing and improving our efforts to provide relevant, quality education and training to **all** vocational education students, from the adolescent to the middle-aged student and older, and from all racial, social, and ethnic backgrounds. As Edward Curran (1982) points out, "We now know that **equal opportunity** and **high quality** cannot be separated without doing violence to the very nature of education. Quality without equal opportunity is elitism. Equal opportunity without quality is fraud" (p. 12).

A change in demography will require vocational leaders in the growth areas to improve secondary/post-secondary articulation, coupled with meaningful and aggressive collaboration with the private sector. In geographic areas experiencing losses in both population and industry, vocational educators must contribute strong leadership to job creation efforts and must expand vocational education's role in entrepreneurship education. In all sectors of the country, increased attention must be devoted to identifying new targets of opportunity for vocational education. This is especially challenging as we move into a society that is increasingly service- and information-oriented.

Economic and Technological Factors

The United States faces enormous budget deficits. Some experts project that this will be the case for the remainder of the decade. Many state governments face similar economic circumstances. Education will continue to be affected by the reality of reduced financial resources. The Reagan administration has proposed that the U.S. Department of Education's share of the federal budget be reduced from its 1978 level of 2.2 percent to 0.8 percent by 1987. Such a plan, coupled with deficits and cutbacks at the state and local level, may reinforce existing pressure to reduce financial resources for vocational education. In the final analysis, the states, local districts, and the private sector will be increasingly responsible for contributing more to the cost of education.

The United States also faces the challenges of intense foreign competition, lagging productivity, changing skill requirements for its workers, and advancing technology. Generally, the productivity growth rate of the nation falls short of some of its more aggressive foreign competitors. From 1970 to 1978 the productivity rate in the United States increased 22 percent, whereas the rates in West Germany and Japan increased approximately 51 and 45 percent respectively. Although the United States is indeed lagging in this regard, we must be cautious in our generalizations. A nation's productivity growth rate is, in large measure, a function of how advanced the nation is to begin with, relative to its social, technical, and economic development.

Many suggest that the skills required by workers in the United States are rapidly changing. Some experts speak of worker skills in a context of "reindustrialization," whereas others speak of skills required for "deindustrialization." Regardless, technological change and the changing nature of work call for close and thoughtful scrutiny of skill requirements and their relationship to education and training programs, both for students preparing for work and for adults in need of upgrading and retraining.

As we study some of the labor market projections and keep abreast of trends popularized by the media, it would appear on the one hand that the rapidly growing occupations relate to a rather sophisticated industry concerned mainly with technical information processing and the use of computers. Robotics, automated banking, microcomputers, laser/optics, and computer-assisted manufacturing illustrate some of the advances that seem to be changing the jobs profile of the nation. Some experts suggest, therefore, that the skill requirements of the work force in general will be more technical and sophisticated, and that large cohorts of highly skilled workers are currently needed and will continue to be in demand.

On the other hand, technological change and advancement may reduce the skill requirements necessary for the employment of most of the work force. Some experts suggest that, in the future, the need for lower-skilled workers will exceed the need for those trained as high-tech technicians. New machines and their "programs" may possess the required skills for much of the manufacturing and information industries. Further, growth in the service industry is not projected to require large numbers of workers with high-technology skills; rather, service industry workers will require keen interpersonal skills. There exists, therefore, a debate as to the true implications of "high technology" for vocational education.

These illustrations of economic and technological conditions and patterns further portray a changing society. What will be vocational education's response?

A commitment to excellence in a context of economic recession and international competition requires learning how to do a better job more efficiently and with less. It also means forming new alliances and broaching new markets. It means learning how to compete, that is, how to market and how to sell. It means assessing our management, administrative, and instructional skills and practices, refining them and bringing them into harmony with the findings of credible research and with the contemporary social, economic, and technological milieu. It means attending seriously to the issues of quality and productivity in every aspect of and at all levels of vocational education — in the office, the classroom, the lab, the shop, the training site, and ultimately in the workplace — at the secondary level, post-secondary level, and in higher education.

Diligent attention must be paid to changing technology and its implications for vocational education. That attention must then be translated into mechanisms to develop, modify, or, if necessary, delete programs and to update the technical awareness and training of secondary and post-secondary instructional personnel, as well as that of teacher educators.

Further, it is important for vocational education leaders to understand and respond intelligently to the technology debate. High tech/high touch: What is the accurate picture? Does the nation need and will it continue to need thousands of new workers with new technical skills, or will it need more workers with perhaps different (but less sophisticated) skills, or will it need something in between? Regardless, the programs and the skilled workers that result will be tested in the marketplace of competition. That marketplace is both national and international, and the competition is fierce.

Indeed, the work-related context spawned by the interplay of economic and technological factors is an arena wherein a renewed commitment to excellence by the vocational education community can and should make a marked difference.

Conditions Specific to the Educational Community

Conditions specific to the educational community also promote and hinder excellence. To illustrate the gain side, access to and retention in all educational programs has improved for minorities, women, and the handicapped. Further, the difference in achievement between whites and blacks in the areas of reading and math has been steadily narrowing. Although more needs to be done, significant improvements in equity, access, and retention have occurred in a relatively short period of time. Much of this is attributable to the impact of the 1968 and 1976 Education Amendments.

The vocational education community has taken a leadership role in fostering a national "mind-set" in the realm of competency-based programs and program accountability. Performance-based and competency-based instruction, curriculum development, and performance-based teacher and administrator preparation have become increasingly common throughout the country. Progress has also been made in the more effective use of advisory groups to promote program improvement and relevancy. Further, a strong and sincere concern for student placement and follow-up is evident throughout vocational education, nationwide.

There are, however, other conditions and issues that warrant attention and resolution. They relate more globally to public education in the United States and may or may not hold true when we view vocational education independently. The fact is that the general public, for more than a decade now, has perceived there to be three major problem areas in public education: (1) a lack of discipline in the schools, (2) a lack of financial support of the schools, and (3) less than satisfactory curricula and generally low standards. Further, some analysts have reported a decline in the academic achievement of American students at all levels, although the proportion of students who graduate from high school has increased over time. This phenomenon has resulted, in part, in a back-to-the-basics educational movement in many sectors of the country.

Although the educational gaps between blacks and whites have been narrowing, minorities, the poor, and other "groups at risk" are increasingly concerned that they will again be adversely affected as educational resources become more limited and budgets are reduced. There may be some justification for this concern. Whereas expenditures per pupil increased substantially during the 1970s, some financial experts believe that growth in expenditures per pupil will not continue through the 1980s. It, therefore, seems reasonable to assume that as the states and communities take on more direct responsibility for the welfare of their citizens, competition for those limited funds will

intensify. Further, as federal funds for education are reduced or withdrawn, those population centers with high concentrations of minorities may perhaps be disproportionately affected.

Other conditions specific to the educational community affect excellence. The qualifications of administrative and instructional personnel are a real concern, especially during times when resources are limited and demands for accountability are heightened. All too frequently, seniority, tenure, and other variables outweigh professional competence as important criteria for the retention of staff when reductions in force are required. Further, recruiting and retaining first-rate instructional personnel are becoming increasingly more difficult tasks. This is especially the case in vocational-technical education, which must compete with the private sector for the same technically qualified personnel.

The lack of up-to-date equipment for vocational and occupational training programs is rapidly becoming a critical concern. As technology advances more rapidly, equipment becomes obsolete more rapidly. In addition, the cost of equipment has risen so markedly during the past decade that the expense of purchasing even the basic, state-of-the-art equipment for classrooms and laboratories has become almost prohibitive in many instances.

Vocational education has profited from a strong and sustained commitment to research and development. For example, the research and development efforts behind contemporary performance- and competency-based instruction have had a profound impact on education and training in the United States, both in the public and private sectors. Further, current research concerned with "time on task" in vocational education settings is beginning to reap benefits, as is the longitudinal research related to cohorts of students who are or were involved in vocational education classes and programs. But as resources become more limited, vocational education research and development and all program improvement mechanisms are seriously threatened.

As illustrated above, conditions within the educational community itself have a direct bearing on the quality of vocational education. Many of those conditions are amendable to refinement and correction from within, whereas others mirror the larger society. There is no doubt, however, that a renewed and serious commitment to excellence by leaders in vocational education has the potential of fostering sound improvements with far-reaching implications. That renewed commitment may take several forms, some of which are described in the following paragraphs.

A commitment to excellence reinforces the purposes of vocational education, as defined by the National Association of State Directors of Vocational Education (1980), in their position paper, "Vocational Education: Purposes, Roles, Responsibilities." The Directors state that the main purposes of vocational education are to -

- provide individuals with the skills they need to attain economic freedom; and
- enhance the productivity of local, state, and national economies (p. 2).

Moreover, they state that "vocational education has no particular constituency; it is a program for all people" (p. 2).

The state directors of vocational education remain committed to providing vocational education of the highest quality to all who choose it as a vehicle for employment-related education and training. Quality vocational education grounded in sound research and development and provided in a context of accessibility and equity must be promoted and protected.

This commitment can be extended through the effective use of networks of substantial influence that are available to vocational education leaders. Such networks should be organized and pursued to influence policy-making bodies at all levels to consider and adopt policies and standards specifically designed to foster excellence in vocational education. These policies and standards should relate to every constituent and to every aspect of the vocational education enterprise: administrators, instructors, the learners, curricula and instructional programs, and research.

Action related to a renewed commitment to excellence will require the pooling of human, material, and physical resources. More effective collaboration must be established with the private sector as well as with all agencies — public and private — that are involved in the education and training of skilled workers. Perhaps the Job Training Partnership Act will provide vocational education with a fresh opportunity to demonstrate its sincerity and ability in formulating new and improved alliances.

Vocational leaders must work harder to attract and retain the most qualified, competent professional personnel possible. Excellence in teaching, administration, research, and development must be expected at all levels, and rewarded appropriately.

The current economic climate, coupled with severe competition for technically qualified personnel, should foster creative mechanisms for involving the private sector in the technical update of teachers and in the actual process of vocational instruction in the classroom and the laboratory. In like fashion, vocational leaders must find creative ways to obtain or access state-of-the-art equipment and facilities for instructional purposes.

Responding to the conditions that influence excellence within the educational community itself may warrant a look at recent research conducted in the private sector. What differentiates a company that does exceptionally well from one that is simply average? Peters and Waterman (1983) attempt to answer this question in "In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies." They report eight attributes that characterize excellent companies. The attributes are as follows:

1. **Cultivate a bias for action, for getting on with the work:**
   "Do it. Fix it. Try it." "The companies may be analytical in their approach to decision making, but they are not paralyzed by that fact . . . Moreover, the companies are experimenters supreme."

2. **Stay close to the customer:**
   "These companies learn from the people they serve. They provide unparalleled quality, service, and reliability . . . Many of the innovative companies got their best product ideas from customers. That comes from listening, intently and regularly."

3. **Foster autonomy and entrepreneurship:**
   "The innovative companies foster many leaders and many innovators throughout the organization . . . They encourage practical risk-taking and support good tries."

4. **Foster productivity through people:**
   "The excellent companies treat the rank-and-file as the root source of quality and productivity gain."

5. **Encourage hands-on, value driven:**
   ". . . The basic philosophy of an organization has far more to do with its achievements than do technological or economic resources, organizational structure, innovation, and timing."

6. **Stick to the knitting:**
   ". . . The odds for excellent performance seem strongly to favor companies that stay reasonably close to the businesses they know."

7. **Maintain a simple form, a lean staff:**
   "The underlying structural forms and systems in the excellent companies are elegantly simple. Top-level staffs are lean."

8. **Maintain simultaneously loose and tight properties:**
   "The excellent companies are both centralized and decentralized . . . They have pushed autonomy down to the shop floor or product development team. On the other hand, they are fanatic centralists around the few core values they hold dear."

These attributes of "excellent companies" are rather straightforward. It would seem reasonable that they, in part or in full, are worthy of serious consideration in the context of vocational education, as we reaffirm our commitment to excellence.

An additional point should be mentioned with regard to the research of Peters and Waterman. One or two strong leaders were associated with each of the companies described as "excellent," and the role of the chief executive officer appeared to be one of managing the values of the organization.

Excellence in vocational education will require the continued exercise of leadership by the federal government. It is the position of the National Association of State Directors of Vocational Education that federal policy concerned with vocational education be "designed to provide a level of support that is consistent with the national interest". . . one that minimizes the "stultifying effects of uniformity and excessive regulation, and encourages experimentation and adaption in order to meet widely varying needs" (p. 6).

Similarly, Robert E. Taylor (1982), in his testimony before the National Commission on Excellence in Education, suggests that the federal role in vocational education should focus on three major dimensions:

1. Amelioration and reduction of critical nationwide problems.

2. Capacitation of states and localities to improve the delivery of quality vocational and technical education.

3. Providing essential services, such as research and development, information systems, evaluation, leadership development, and technical assistance (p. 42).

Vocational education is indeed in the national best interest, and as such a strong and continuing federal role will enable a decentralized system to respond to national priorities in a cohesive manner.

As we move into an era of increased concern about the quality of education in the United States, we must be cautious of overgeneralization and overreaction. As educational policies are considered at the state and local levels, we must call for and exercise thoughtful deliberation, considering all of the potential ramifications for vocational education. Vocational education must remain as a strong and viable option for those who choose it as a vehicle for career planning, preparation, progression, upgrading, and retraining.

Summary

This paper has attempted to present some of the more profound variables that influence the quality of vocational education in the United States. Among those discussed were demographic shifts, economic conditions, technological innovation and change, and conditions specific to the educational enterprise itself. A partial response to each of these factors has been offered in the form of a reaffirmation to excellence in vocational education by the National Association of State Directors of Vocational Education.

The Association hopes this statement will serve as a catalyst for thoughtful discussion and action by persons and groups concerned with the interplay of education and work: educators, elected officials, business and industry representatives, governmental units, policy groups, and the public.

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